

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY JIDDA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SANA 3382

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINR, YE

SUBJ: BIOGRAPHIC REPORTING: ABD AL-KARIM AL-ARASHI

1. ABD AL-KARIM AL-ARASHI BECAME CHAIRMAN OF A FOUR-MAN PRESIDENTIAL COUNCIL ON THE AFTERNOON OF THE DAY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, AHMED AL-GHASHMI, WAS ASSASSINATED. THE COUNCIL WAS ELECTED IN SOME FASHION BY THE SAME APPOINTED ASSEMBLY WHICH HAD ELECTED GHASHMI PRESIDENT, BUT IT IS AVOWEDLY A STRICTLY TEMPORARY DEVICE TO ALLOW THE PARLIAMENT -- AFTER VARIOUS CONSULTATIONS -- TO ELECT A NEW PRESIDENT. THE COUNCIL WAS ADOPTED IN PART BECAUSE THERE WERE NO VICE PRESIDENTS AND NO LAW OF SUCCESSION. ARASHI WAS SPEAKER OF THE ASSEMBLY AND HELD -- ALONE AMONG YEMENI POLITICIANS -- THE NEBULOUS TITLE OF ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT.

2. THOUGH IT IS BY NO MEANS CLEAR THAT ARASHI WILL RETAIN HIS TITLE AFTER THE PRESENT POLITICAL MANUEVERINGS, WE HAVE TRIED TO FLESH OUT A POTRAIT OF MAN.

3. AFTER THE ASSASSINATION, IN EIGHT MONTHS' TIME, OF TWO PRESIDENTS, ARASHI'S WIFE AND CHILDREN ARE SAID TO OBJECT LOUDLY TO HIS NEW JOB; HE APPEARS TO BE VERY PLEASED WITH HIMSELF. ARASHI IS THIN LIKE MOST YEMENIS, BUT TALLER THAN AVERAGE -- ABOUT FIVE NINE OR TEN. HE APPEARS TO TRY TO EXAGGERATE HIS HEIGHT BY HOLDING HIMSELF VERY ERECT

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AND LEANING BACKWARDS A BIT. HIS PUBLIC POSTURE SOMETIMES INCLUDES A GAZE FIXED IN THE DISTANCE, RATHER AS IF HE IS CONCENTRATING ON SOMETHING MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN HIS IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS. HE HAS TWO SPEAKING STYLES, WHICH RE-ENFORCE HIS RATHER UNNATURAL PUBLIC PERSONA. ONE IS STRIDENT, ROLLING, DEMANDING, BUT ENDLESSLY PLATITUDINOUS; HE PLAYS POLONIUS TO THE HAMLETS OF YEMEN. THE OTHER IS EQUALLY

PLATITUDINOUS BUT SPOKEN GENTLY, AS IF FROM A GREAT REMOVE, A POSE OF SANCTIMONY. EMBASSY MEMBERS HAVE HAD LITTLE CONTACT WITH HIM BUT THE HUMAN QUALITIES WHICH YEMENIS POSSESS IS SUCH ABUNDANCE -- BROAD HUMOR, PERSONAL WARMTH, SHARP ARGUMENT -- HAVEN'T SURFACED IN ARASHI. SOME YEMENIS HAVE PARODIED HIS PERFORMANCE AS PRESIDENT BY MIMICKING HIM BEFORE A MIRROR, STANDING WITH TREMBLING SERIOUSNESS AS HE SHAKES THE HANDS OF HUNDREDS OF IMAGINARY WELL-WISHERS.

4. THERE IS MORE THAT MIGHT BE MENTIONED ABOUT HIS APPEARANCE AS A GAUGE TO HIS PERSONALITY. YEMENIS DIVIDE THEMSELVES INTO "TURBANS" AND "TROUSERS." THE LATTER, BY THEIR WESTERN DRESS, IDENTIFY THEMSELVES WITH MODERNIZATION AND CHANGE. THE LATTER ARE TRADITIONALISTS.

5. ARASHI IS A TURBAN. HE IS ALWAYS SEEN IN PUBLIC IN A LONG EDWARDIAN FROCK COAT THAT REACHES TO HIS KNEES. A MATCHING VEST OF THE SAME DARK, WOOLLEN MATERIAL COVERS A NIGHTSHIRT GARMENT WHICH EVERYONE AFFECTS IN THE PENINSULA. THE TURBAN, TIGHTLY WRAPPED TO DISTINGUISH HIM FROM THE HEADDRESS OF TRIBESMEN, FITS HIS HEAD CLOSELY. THIS IS A CAREFULLY MODIFIED VERSION OF THE TRADITIONAL QADI'S CLOTHES AND SIGNIFIES CLEARLY TO THE OBSERVER WHERE ARASHI STANDS ON MANY RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ISSUES.

6. ARASHI GRADUATED FROM THE SCHOOL SET UP BY THE IMAN TO TRAIN
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JUDGES. THIS SCHOOL, DAR AL ALUM, WHICH STILL STANDS IN SANA, WAS ONE OF THE TWO SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SANA, THE OTHER BEING THE MILITARY COLLEGE. ITS CURRICULUM INCLUDED MORE THAN MOSQUE SCHOOLS -- FOR INSTANCE, HISTORY AND SOME MUSLIM SCIENCE -- BUT THE SCHOOL WAS INTENDED TO TURN OUT ADMINISTRATORS FOR THE IMAM'S GOVERNMENT. IT WAS IN MANY WAYS AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL, WITH A DISTINGUISHED LIST OF GRADUATES WHOSE ABILITY AT LEGAL ANALYSIS WAS BOTH BROAD AND PRECISE. ARASHI IS NOT KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN A VERY GOOD STUDENT OR A FINE ADMINISTRATOR LATER, BUT HIS INTELLIGENCE IS NOT IN DISPUTE AND HIS HONESTY IS LEGENDARY. THE SCHOOL MARKED HIM FOR PUBLIC SERVICE, AND HE HAS BEEN AT IT FOR YEARS, USUALLY IN A JOB THAT ALLOWED HIM TO EXERCISE HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE WILLINGNESS TO PERUSE AND CHANGE ORDERS, DRAFTS OF SPEECHES, SETS OF FIGURES, TITLE DEEDS AND SO FORTH. A STAFF AIDE WHO WORKED FOR HIM UNDER HAMDI CAN STILL RECALL -- BREATHLESSLY -- ARASHI'S PLEASURE IN SEEING ALL PAPERS ROUTED THROUGH HIS HANDS, CHANGED IN MINUTE WAYS TO BRING IT IN LINE WITH SHARI'AH LAW, AND SENT ON TO VARIOUS OTHER BUREAUCRATS OR COMMITTEES IN THE YAR. ARASHI APPEARS TO KNOW ABOUT AS MUCH AS ANY MAN ALIVE ABOUT HOW THE YAR WORKS, EVEN IF HE HAS HIMSELF NEVER TAKEN AN INITIATIVE, ANALYZED A PROBLEM, OR MANAGED A MAJOR PROGRAM.

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7. AL-ARASHI HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY WITH THE CITY OF SANA AND THE GOVERNMENTAL APPARATUS LOCATED THERE. HE HAS NOMINAL CONNECTIONS WITH THE HASHID TRIBAL CONFEDERATION BECAUSE OF FAMILY ORIGINS IN THE KHAWLAN REGION, BUT HE IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL YEMENI URBANITE.

8. HIS CAREER BEGAN IN EARNEST AFTER THE REVOLUTION, WHICH HE HAS UNDEVIATINGLY ACCEPTED FROM THE BEGINNING IN 1962. HE BECAME DIRECTOR OF PROPERTY AT FIRST, A HIGHLY POLITICAL JOB WHICH INVOLVED RESTORED PROPERTY USURPED BY THE ROYAL FAMILY AND REDISTRIBUTING THE LEGITIMATE PROPERTY OF THE FAMILY. IN 1971 HE WAS NAMED GOVERNOR OF SANA. THE FOLLOWING YEAR HE BECAME MINISTER OF FINANCE UNDER PRIME MINISTER MUHSIN AL-AYNI, THEN MOVED TO THE MINISTRY OF WAQF AND RELIGIOUS GUIDANCE AS MINISTER IN 1973. SHORTLY AFTER THE ACCESSION OF POWER OF IBRAHIM AL-HAMDI IN 1974, AL-ARASHI BECAME HIS PERSONAL ASSISTANT FOR INTERNAL OR DOMESTIC AFFAIRS, APPARENTLY DEALING ONLY WITH LEGAL, RELIGIOUS AND FINANCIAL MATTERS. THOS IN THE GOVERNMENT -- LIKE PRIME MINISTER ABD AL-AZIZ ABD AL-GHANI -- TEND TO HATE HIS MEDDLING AND EMPIRE-BUILDING AND SAW HIM AS A HASHID WHO OPPOSED THEIR SHAFE'I ADMINISTRATION. THE HAMDI ASSOCIATION FIRST PROVED REWARDING FOR AL-ARASHI AND HIS FAMILY. ABD AL-KARIM WAS A CLOSE ADVISER, A BROTHER, ABD WAHAB WAS MADE AMBASSADOR TO QATAR, AND A HALF-BROTHER, YAHYA, WAS NAMED MINISTER OF INFORMATION IN 1975. THE RELATIONSHIP SOURED, HOWEVER, IN 1976 OR EARLY 1977. YAHYA'S
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REFUSAL TO ACCEPT DEMOTION FROM MINISTER OF INFORMATION TO PROVINCIAL GOVERNOR IS CITED AS THE CHIEF CAUSE OF THE AL-ARASHI FAMILY'S FALL INTO DISFAVOR, BUT THAT MAY ONLY BE SYMPTOMATIC OF OTHER PROBLEMS. IN ANY CASE, ABD AL-KARIM HAS BEEN DESCRIBED BY OBSERVERS AS HAVING BEEN "FROZEN" BY HAMDI - RETAINING HIS TITLE, BUT LOSING NEARLY ALL POWER.

9. HAMDI'S DEATH AND THE ONSET OF THE GHASHMI REGIME PUT NEW LIFE IN AL-ARASHI'S CAREER. HE WAS RE-NAMED AS ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR INTERNAL AFFAIRS, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHEN GHASHMI SOUGHT TO LEGITIMIZE HIS POSITION BY REESTABLISHING A PARLIAMENTARY BODY - THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY - AL-ARASHI WAS SWIFTLY ELECTED AS SPEAKER. AS NOTED EARLIER, WHEN PRESIDENT GHASHMI WAS KILLED ON JUNE 24, AL-ARASHI WAS NAMED THE SAME DAY AS INTERIM PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLICAN COUNCIL.

10. COMMENT: ABD AL-KARIM AL-ARASHI WOULD SEEM TO HAVE NO STRONG SUPPORTERS AT ALL FOR CONTINUING AS HEAD OF STATE. NEVERTHELESS, HE MAY DO SOON AND IF WE WERE PRESSED FOR THE ODDS, WE WOULD PUT THEM IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF FORTY PERCENT. THE JOCKEYING FOR POSITION BY NUMEROUS FACTIONS, TOGETHER WITH THE BUFFERING RELUCTANCE OF MOST YEMENIS TO FORCE OR EVEN CONTEMPLATE ANOTHER CRISIS AT THIS TIME MAY PERMIT AL-ARASHI, CLEARLY A POWER LIGHT-WEIGHT, TO RIDE THE CREST AS TITULAR LEADER FOR SOME TIME.
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